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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this paper is to present the outcome of an evaluation of the effect of the implementation of a learning community on the academic performance and academic involvement (attendance) of 50 urban African American freshmen who had been identified as at highest risk for academic failure. The learning community, the Student-Teacher-Parent Support (STPS) Unit, created guidelines to work collaboratively with students, parents, and counselors to insure the best possible climate for learning. The STPS Unit was found to be most effective in increasing the academic performance and academic involvement of academically unprepared students. Attendance and academic performance were found to be significantly higher for participants in the STPS Unit than for nonparticipants in a control group. (Contains 7 tables and 10 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Using Familialism within the Schools to Increase Attendance and Academic Performance of African American Urban High School Freshmen: Evaluating the Student-Teacher-Parent Support Unit

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Using Familialism within the Schools to Increase Attendance and Academic Performance of African American Urban High School Freshmen: Evaluating the Student-Teacher-Parent Support Unit

Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to present the outcome of an evaluation of the effect of the implementation of a learning community on the academic performance and academic involvement (attendance) of urban, African American, freshmen who had been identified as highest risk for academic failure. The Student-Teacher-Parent Support (STPS) Unit was found to be most effective in increasing the academic performance and academic involvement of academically unprepared students. Attendance and Academic Performance were found to be significantly higher for participants in the STPS Unit than nonparticipants in a Control group.

Using Familialism within the Schools

to Increase Attendance and Academic Performance

of African American Urban High School Freshmen:

Evaluating the Student-Teacher-Parent Support Unit

Within the literature addressing African American culture, familialism and connectedness are qualities that are pervasive and deeply rooted within predominantly Black communities as well as within individuals who experienced childhood in such environments. Familialism involves viewing the family and family relationship as centrally self-defining and viewing social obligations to family as ongoing and normative (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Family and family relationships, including that among fictive kin, are typically viewed as critical contributors to how individuals within this context experience life in general, but also how they define themselves (Asante, 1987, 1988; McAdoo, 1988, Jackson, 1991). Family, including biological relatives as well as the surrounding community, has been described as the first line of defense against a discriminating environment (Giordano, Cernkovich, & DeMaris, 1993). Familialism and discrimination may function to make parent-adolescent relations closer and more intimate among African Americans than among Whites (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Giordano Et al, 1993; Jackson McCullough, & Gurin, 1988). Consequently, individuals' sense of themselves as being with purpose and having meaning is integrally related to their identity as a member of a collective and reflected in a personal commitment to engaging in giving to and receiving from their group of identity (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).

Given this deeply rooted cultural norm associated with the African American community and its association with a sense of having a purpose and meaning, it is no surprise that youth whose identify is most closely related to the cultural norm of familialism also tend to have a more

positive attitudes about school and are more likely to feel efficacious about school and aspire to further education (Bowman & Howard, 1985). A sense of self as part of kin and community, as giving and receiving from the group, is hypothesized as a second, the first being African American identity, component of African American identity, which provides a sense of meaning an purpose and ties the self to normative strategies for goal attainment, particularly school achievement. In fact, Oyserman, Gant, & Ager (1995), in review of findings from a study of African American and White university students different strategies toward achievement were identified. These researchers concluded that individualism as a world view may not be advantageous to African American because it focuses on separateness and achievement as the essence of person hood, making one vulnerable to self-blame or depression if one does not achieve and also reducing one's ability to make sense of the world to the extent to which one is viewed being importantly defined by group membership.

Nevertheless, community public schools, in general, and even within many African American communities, tend to adhere to instruction strategies and teacher-student relationships that are individualistic in nature. Students' family members are way too often not critical parties in the education of their children and the contact between teachers and parents is typically limited to the one or two parent-teacher meetings that occur over the academic year or when academic failure or behavioral problems are noted. The very nature of the individualist based instruction may be diametrically opposed to what provides some African American student populations the sense of meaning and purpose essential for academic success.

Given this pervasive cultural norm within African American communities it would appear reasonable that strategies to increase academic persistence and academic involvement in urban schools having predominantly Black student populations, would focus on the creation of learning

communities that involve active participation of students, families and/or significant others within the surrounding community, counselors, and the teachers. In these communities, as in the familialism, each party would have a sense of obligation to support, maintain communications, and assume responsibility for each of the others (Jackson, 1991). Each party is assumed to be responsible to and responsible for each of the others in this connectedness. All students would be responsible for the well-being and learning of one another and adults would facilitate in the adherence of cultural norms that result in optimal levels of knowledge acquisition academic performance. The authors of this study hypothesize that such a learning community will increase not only the academic performance, but academic involvement (attendance) among any population of African American students. The objective of this research is to examine the influence of a learning community described above on the highest risk urban, African American, high school freshmen, in a predominantly African American community.

Method

School Setting

The high school (9th to 12th grades) having a population of approximately 1200, 99.9 % of which were African American, was located in an urban city located in the Midwest Region. The community had one of the large urban areas with one of the highest crime rates in the nation and higher unemployment, particularly within the African American community. Sixty percent of the teaching faculty was White; 70% of the counseling and administrative staff was African American. The school's largest students population was composed of freshmen who had a long-standing attrition rate between 65-75%. The graduating senior class typically consisted of 100-125 students each year. The role of researcher was to work collaboratively with teachers and

counselors in an effort to develop an intervention that would effectively address this high dropout rate among freshmen.

Participants

Student participants were in a 53 freshmen cohort who were admitted during the Fall semester and who shared the same teachers during the period of program implementation. These freshmen had been identified by 8th grade counselors as being most at-risk for academic failure due to past high absenteeism (academic involvement) and lower GPA during middle school enrollment. Three students were transferred to another school some time during the semester. Parental consent was attained from parents and guardians of all student participants.

Student-Teacher-Support Unit

Teacher participants were those who chose to participate in the development of the Student Teach Support Unit by abiding by the created guidelines which included structured, concerted efforts to work collaboratively with students, parents, and counselors to insure the best possible climate for learning in the classroom. This required that teachers: positively reinforce students' engagement in learning appropriate behaviors, commit most of the classroom time to instruction, guiding experiential learning exercises, and facilitating classroom discussions related to the course content; commit less of the classroom time to discipline and correction; identify and monitor students' adherence to well-defined classroom behavioral norms (i.e., attendance, arriving to class on time, bringing, materials to class, bring homework to class, and engaging in behaviors that are conducive to the learning of all); maintain a positive working relationship with parents by periodically notifying them of the classroom rules and expectations; notify students and parents of adherence and violation of these rules; consult with counselor, other teachers within the team, and with parents and students in developing strategies better understand and intervene with

students' chronic behavioral or academic problems. Those students who violated classroom rules that disturbed the learning of other were immediately referred to a counselor-run room for consultation, clarification of the reason for the violation, and to identify an alternative strategy to response the next time. In addition, students also continued work that had been started in class and received tutoring and guidance with homework completion during their time in the time-out room. Parents and or guardians were notified after two violations within a week. Those students without violations received special opportunities and learning experiences that the others do not (i e., developing computer competency, conversations with the principal, career development workshops, tokens to purchase school supplies and treats in school) and their parents were notified by mail of their students honorable classroom behavior once a month.

At this school, prior to the program implementation, teachers tended to commit a great deal more classroom time to correction and punishment, and less to instruction. Teachers had little or no contact with parents and the contact that did exist tended to focus primarily on problems. Many of the teachers reported experiencing significantly higher levels of occupational stress due to role overload. This program was developed in order to result in more positive and collaborative working relationships in order to create a classroom climate more conducive to instruction and learning.

The role of the faculty participant was that of the team leader; and, the counselor who supervised the time-out room, where students were referred upon violation of classroom rules, was either a masters or doctoral level counselor trainees. Of the four teachers who participated on the team, 3 were White, including 1 White male and 1 African American female. Both the university representative and the Unit supervisors were African American.

The first 8 weeks of the Fall semester, participating university faculty, counselors, and teachers held regularly scheduled meeting for orientation to the Unit participation and the development of incentives for students and parents active involvement in the learning of their children. During this period consent for participation in research forms were mailed to parents and all were returned providing consent for their child's participation. Parents were offered the opportunity for assistance in buying students school supplies, if needed. (This was offered in order to discern between students not bringing materials to class because of parent's inability to provide them and students not bringing materials to class because of not feeling responsible for doing so because other teachers had not expected this cooperation in the learning process.) During this 8 week period, baseline attendance records and academic performance of all participating students were monitored and recorded. Teachers also used this period to observe students' classroom behaviors for the purposed of categorization described below. Counselors, teachers, and the university representative use this time to do assessments of the students' academic preparedness. All participating parties were informed of the changes that were to come after the 8th week of school.

Though this was a point of convenience, mid-semestér, for the purpose of program implementation, it was also started at this point because seldom were students schedules finalized at any earlier point in the semester. Eight weeks also allowed teachers and students to develop of sense of permanence that would not have been there if the program had begun any earlier within the semester.

Procedure

In order to best understand with whom this cultural based learning community would be most effective and what interventions were most needed, all participating students were assigned

to either being academically prepared or academically unprepared for high school level curriculum. The Wide Range Achievement Test--Revised (WRAT-R) (Jastak & Wilkinson), that was designed to measure the basic educational skills of work recognition, spelling, and arithmetic, and identified individual with learning difficulties. Table 1 presents the reading, spelling and arithmetic grade level competencies of all participating students. Twenty-two (44%) of the participants' scores indicated a high school level or post high school level of reading competency; 14 (28%) indicated a high school level or post high school level of spelling competency; and 1 (2%) indicated a high school level or post high school level of math competency.

Based on these WRAT scores, students were assigned to either being academically prepared or academically unprepared for high school level curriculum. Students were assigned to the academically prepared group if they scored at least an 8th grade level of competence on at least two of the three WRAT subscales. All other students were assigned the status of academically unprepared.

To add greater clarity in understanding the outcomes of the program evaluation, students were also assigned to groups based upon teacher observed behaviors in the classroom over a two week period. Teachers were asked to independently assign all students to either the behaviorally honorable group or behaviorally dishonorable group. Honorability was the degree to which students engaged in behaviors that were conducive to instruction and learning in the classroom and was considered by all adult participants as being equally as important and just as worthy of special acknowledgment as academic competence. Once group assignments had been made by teachers independently, teachers came together to discuss each of their decisions. Out of the 50 remaining students, assignments were consist across all participating teachers for 43 students (86% agreement). Those students for which agreement did not occur were categorized as Mixed

Honorable. This phrase for chosen to portray students whose 'problem' behaviors appeared to be unique to the teacher and the classroom. Table 2 presents the results of the final 40 assignments on which the teachers agreed and the status of students as indicated by WRAT scores. The most represented group within the sample were the low honorable and academically unprepared. The least represented in the group was the low honorable and academically prepared.

Referrals to the Unit

The primary objective of the staff of the Student-Teacher-Parent Support Unit, a pilot in-school program, is to develop a collaborative relationship with teachers and parents which will assist, support, and reinforce freshmen's adjustment to increased expectations of students' participation in learning. The intended outcome is an increase in students' academic ability/knowledge and a decrease in behaviors which impede the development and maintenance of an environment conducive to learning for all students. Tables 3, 4, and 5 present an overview of records collected for the specific purpose of program evaluation. Table 3 presents the number of students referred to the Unit by the teacher by student category. Students that were referred to the Unit most often were represented within the Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared group; the least often were in the High Honorable and Academically Prepared group.

Table 4 presents the average number of referrals per student per group. The student group that had students who were referred most often were in the Low Honorable and Academically Prepared group. The 7 students who were referred from this category were referred an average of approximately 6 times each. The student group that had students who were referred least often were in the High Honorable and Academically Prepared group. The 3 students who were referred from this category were referred an average of approximately 2 times each.

Table 5 presents the percentage of reasons for referrals to the Unit. Fifty percent of the referrals to the Unit were due to students having engaged in disruptive classroom behaviors. Findings reflect a consistent decrease in referrals between the 9th and 15th weeks of the semester that range from 24 referrals during week 8, the first week of the program, to 8 referrals during week 14 of the semester.

Program Evaluation

Given that this pilot program was implemented only during the last eight weeks of one semester, outcomes in academic performance and absenteeism were evaluated in two different ways. The first was by comparing patterns of attendance and academic performance of participants with students who had been identified as being most at risk however who did not have access to the Unit, but had been instructed by the same participating instructors at an earlier time. This group consisting of two 9th grade sections (n = 50) and is considered the control group. The group having access to the Unit will be indicated as the treatment group. No significant differences were found between the control group on GPA and attendance at the time the Unit began. Table 6 presents the results of these comparisons between the control group and the experimental group. In each case, the treatment group indicated an improvement in academic performance and in attendance. In addition, 28% of the control group experienced lower GPA and decreased attendance, the worse case scenario, whereas, only 8% of the treatment group did so.

The second strategy for program evaluation was to compare students' (n = 50) course grades and attendance from the first grading period to the second grading period which occurred during the implementation of the Unit. Table 7 presents the results of the comparisons between participants academic performance and attendance during the first grading period before the implementation of the program and that after the having experienced the Unit. Results are

presented by category of student. In general, the students who were found to most benefit from the implementation of the Unit (i.e., increased attendance and increased GPA) were those who were academically unprepared, the students that schools had failed. It appeared that the structured community and incentive based classroom environment was most beneficial to those students who were not initially academically functioning at grade level. Honorability status varied across high, low, and mixed categories. Most (n = 26; 68.4%) participants benefited in some way (i.e., either increased attendance and/or increased GPA). However, there were participants (n = 12; 32.6%) who did not benefit from the structured familial Unit (i.e., decreased attendance or GPA/attendance).

Discussion

Steward and Logan (1992) strongly suggested the necessity of the development of a collaborative link between African American students' families and the school. However, in spite of this suggestion from these authors and others presented earlier in this text, schools continue to function as if these suggestions are not to be taken seriously. This evaluation of a program that actually tests the suggestion of considering and understanding academic success within a cultural context and findings suggest that for many African American high school students, this structured intervention based upon the value of connectedness would be very effective in increasing students' attendance and GPA.

However, findings offer no explanation for the number of students who were not affected in any way by the Unit and to some degree whose behaviors became worse. It appeared that an experience that has been considered by many as a critical part of the cultural norm for African Americans may be uncomfortable for some African Americans. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the stress of the transition from status quo to structured collaboration might have

been very difficult for some. For example, upon the implementation of the Unit and the classroom rules, after one week, one of the student participants approached the principle to complain that the teachers in the Unit were being unreasonable and 'mean'. When asked to describe the behaviors that they considered to be 'mean', the students explained that the: "teachers are expecting us to bring in homework, arrive to class on time, and bring materials to class, and they just keep calling my mother when I do something wrong and get me in trouble. This is hard, Ms. _____." One nonparticipating teacher told a student who complained to them about the 'rules' that they did not have to do what the participating teachers were requiring and if they tried to make him come back and see her. One parent called the school acknowledging that they know that their child was disruptive and tended to be 'bad' sometimes, but they did not think that these behaviors should have a consequence that the student perceived to be negative. One of the participating teachers expressed some concern about the students beginning to misbehave in order to leave the regular classroom. The stress of moving from a system that was rooted in individualism to that which required active participation and responsibility from a collective perspective might have negative influenced the very variables that the Unit was intended to improve. This minor cultural change in a short period of time in only one small section of the freshmen class, resulted in positive change for some and negative change for others.

In retrospect, the authors believe that some of these reactions might have been avoided if time that had been committed to assisting participating teachers to make the transition from status quo to the collective perspective had also been shared with assisting and preparing students for the transition. The number of positive influences might have been increased by this early student preparation.

Another important finding to note is that out of the four students whose attendance and GPA both decreased, three were academically prepared and two had initially been identified as honorable by all participating teachers in the Unit. What happened? Though the 'transition stress' explanation presented above may be appropriate in this case as well, another plausible cause may be that some academically prepared students may experience boredom with the curriculum that does not challenge or hold their interest. Though academically competent, low performance may be indicative of low commitment and low interest in the content. Beyond this explanation, we believe that the future study of the limitations of this cultural contextual model within the schools for the purpose of increasing academic success is certainly warranted.

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Table 1.

Participants' Grade level competencies in Reading, Spelling, and Math.

Grade Level	Reading	Spelling	Math
Elementary	19 (38%)	21 (42%)	17 (34%)
Middle School	8 (16%)	15 (30%	32 (64)
High School	21 (42%)	13 (26%)	1 (2%)
Post High School	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)

Table 2.

Students Representation across Academically Preparedness and Honorability as Perceived by Teachers.

	#	%
High Honorable and Academically Prepared	9	22.5
High Honorable and Academically Unprepared	11	27.5
Low Honorable and Academically Prepared	7	17.5
Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared	13	32.5

Table 3

Number of student referred to Unit by student category

	#	%
High Honorable and Academically Prepared	3	10.7
High Honorable Academically Unprepared	5	17.8
Low Honorable Academically Prepared	7	25.0
Low Honorable Academically Unprepared	13	46.4

Table 4

Mean # referrals per student by student category

	#
High Honorable and Academically Prepared	2.0
High Honorable Academically Unprepared	2.20
Low Honorable Academically Prepared	5.71
Low Honorable Academically Unprepared	4.76

Table 5

Percentage of reasons for referrals to Unit

Reason for Referrals	#	%
Disruptive classroom behaviors	68	50
Not having materials required for classroom activities	53	38.90
Tardiness	15	11.02

Table 6

Treatment and Control Group Comparisons of GPA and Attendance Patterns

Patterns of Attendance and GPA	Control Group % (n)	Treatment Group % (n)
Students whose attendance and GPA increased	4 (2)	8 (4)
Students whose attendance increased and GPA remained constant	14 (7)	20 (10)
Students whose GPA increased and attendance remained constant	6 (3)	24 (12)
Students whose attendance decreased and GPA decreased	28 (14)	8 (4)
Students whose GPA remained constant and attendance decreased	24 (12)	16 (8)

Table 7

Comparisons of GPA and Attendance Patterns between pre-Unit and post-Unit outcomes by category of student participants.

Students whose attendance increased and GPA increased

50% (2) High Honorable and Academically Unprepared

25% (1) Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared

25% (1) Mixed Honorable and Academically Unprepared

Students whose attendance increased and GPA remained constant

20% (2) High Honorable and Academically Unprepared

40% (4) Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared

20% (2) High Honorable and Academically Prepared

20% (2) Mixed Honorable and Academically Unprepared

Students whose GPA increased and attendance remained constant

16.6% (2) Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared

25 % (3) High Honorable and Academically Prepared

41.6% (5) High Honorable and Academically Unprepared

8.3% (1) Low Honorable and Academically Prepared

8.3% (1) Mixed Honorable Academically Unprepared

Students whose attendance decreased and GPA decreased

50% (2) High Honorable and Academically Prepared

25% (1) Low Honorable and Academically Prepared

25% (1) Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared

Table 7

Comparisons of GPA and Attendance Patterns between pre-Unit and post-Unit outcomes by category of student participants (continued).

Students whose attendance decreased and GPA remained constant

62.5% (5) Low Honorable and Academically Unprepared

12.5% (1) High Honorable and Academically Prepared*

12.5% (1) High Honorable and Academically Unprepared

12.5% (1) Low Honorable and Academically Prepared

Note. This student was pregnant and had a baby, and consequently was absent moreso than during the early part of the semester.